

-- TOM THOMSON --

— Steve Savage

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Into the story of Canadian Art steps the figure of a tall, lean woodsman with his paddle and palate - TOM THOMSON. He came as the Spirit of the North, and in his short and dramatic career he gave us a new interpretation in paint of our country.

Before we can fully appreciate the development of Thomson let us get a complete picture of his background. Just about the time that Paul Kane was chasing buffalo over the prairies a certain Thomas Thomson, a builder by trade, came out from Glasgow and settled in the village of Claremont thirty odd miles outside Toronto. He came in the days of the log cabin and of barter when one worked a whole year for a team of oxen. Being a thrifty Scot his first log-cabin was soon replaced by a beautifully built stone house. Thomas Thomson married Elizabeth Brodie whose family had come out from Scotland at about the same time. Their son, John, was the apple of their eyes, and when John grew up and married the school-teacher, Margaret Matheson, from New Brunswick, their joy was complete. "Now", said Thomas, "we shall get the next farm for John, build him a stone house just like ours and settle down and live happily ever after."

Accordingly the farm was bought, and the house built, and for some years John and his family lived contentedly. They named the seventh son Thomas after his grandfather. Shortly afterwards old Thomas died, and without further ado, John hitched up the horse to the buckboard, and taking a spade with him to turn the soil, he drove from Claremont up to Leith on the Georgian Bay, not far from Owen Sound.



When he reached the great waters of the Bay with its surrounding country so rich in rhythmic beauty, after the flat stretches of Eastern Ontario, John knew that he had found what he wanted. He secured a farm house in the vicinity and hastened home with the news to Margaret.

So the family moved and little Tom Thomson was carried in his mother's arms all that long and tedious journey in a jolting waggon to his new home - that land whose strong and impelling beauty was to hold him in a grip from which he never escaped. Time passed and soon the wooden structure of the Thomson farm house was replaced by one of brick and before the family circle was complete there were eleven little Thomsons running in and out of the cozy red farm house.

Tom grew into a delicate, dark-eyed child. The doctor shook his head when he saw him. "You'd better keep that boy out of doors as much as possible; give him a dog and a fishing-rod and let him go," and Tom went. And this was the foundation of Thomson's life as an artist of the north country.

There are seven rivers running into the Georgian Bay. Up these channels, skirting the rocky ledges in the early mists of morning, looking for the best fishing grounds, Tom's canoe would glide, and many a night when the tea-bell rang and the family gathered around the lamp-lit table Tom was nowhere to be seen. "Oh, he's all right; he's camping out to-night," was the remark, and sure enough in the morning the lithe figure would come climbing up the hill with a string of speckled and grey trout for breakfast.

At this time Tom showed considerable interest in drawing.



Down in the cellar we find the panels of the doors and cupboards of the farm house decorated with drawings of pine trees and fir cones, squirrels and rabbits, and he often entertained his brothers and sisters by making caricatures of the various figures in the town. He drew instinctively.

Boyhood slipped away and the stern facts of reality faced Tom. What should he do? Join his brothers in Seattle or settle down on the farm? He went to Seattle but business life proved to be anything but successful, and discouraged, he returned to the Bay.

Just at this time (1908) when advertising as a Big Business was taking hold in Canada, we find the firm of Grip, Ltd., in Toronto, where Albert Robson was Art director, opening their doors to artists and designers of first rate ability. They came from the schools of South Kensington, Antwerp and other places. And so it came about that a tall young Englishman, Arthur Lismer, found himself sitting at a desk there. Opposite to him was a certain J.E.H. MacDonald, one of the first designers in Canada. Fred Varley, another Englishman, who had been awarded the gold medal at the Antwerp Academy, kicked his heels on the other side of the room. Here they were full of energy and enthusiasm, looking about for some way of expressing themselves as a relief from the restrictions of the office. Into this firm came Thomson. He was put in the Junior Department, and started his career at lettering and decorative design. Whatever he touched bore the mark of distinction and soon his work was noticed by the men in the upper department.

"Do you know," said MacDonald, "there is a chap downstairs who knows his job and seems a rather interesting type. Have you



seen him? His name is Thomson. Let's have him up."

So Thomson was brought into contact with this group of trained artists---the untutored woodsman with the love of the North.

Thomson ran a double programme. He worked at the firm during the winter months but as soon as the snow began to melt he was off North. During the summer he became a guide in the Algonquin Park district.

In the meantime two more figures came into view, LAWREN HARRIS, just back from studying in Germany, and a young Montrealer, A.Y. JACKSON, home from Paris. Harris, the enthusiast, helped by his friend, Dr. J. MacCallum, was putting up a studio building as a centre for Canadian Art. Jackson was persuaded to become one of the first tenants. He and Thomson rented a studio together; it was a happy partnership. Jackson shared unstintingly with Thomson all his experience and knowledge of the Art world. Thomson drank it in and talked of unknown lakes and shining rivers and the glory of the north country.

And so Art left the farmyard and the cows and went north to a land that was hacked up by lumbermen, dammed by the beaver, fire-swept by the carelessness of settlers, and made glorious by an ever resourceful nature with her changing seasons. The artists saw the wonders of the north, great black pines against skies broken with strange bands of light, and the tangle wood of the forest, deep mosses and still lakes, with long lines of the wild geese winging their wedged flight over the dark hills.

It was the Autumn that Thomson loved best, when the sky became clear green, and the golds, yellows and burnished bronze of October fell upon the maples and poplars and the ancient cedars and pines



stood as sombre masses in the brilliance. His early work was restrained and hesitant, with no hint of its future brilliance. He, of course, never thought of himself as a genius. His friends did, however. Dr. McCallum knew it from the first meticulous little sketches and there was no lack of admiration from his friends. The Doctor would buy some sketches. Harris would slip a beautiful fresh canvas on his easel and slip out, for the cost of paint and canvas was a serious problem. Slowly he got into the swing. He learned how to build up his composition, how to simplify his forms, to accent his values, and to use his paint with a full rhythmical stroke.

His first large canvas, "The Northern Lake", was bought by the Ontario Government---one of the few canvases he ever sold.

1913,- and again the snow is flying and the Northern Lakes are freezing over; the tent is stowed away and the old grey canoe stored for the winter, and Thomson is back in Toronto with a pack-sack full of sketches.

It was as if the seal of a locked treasure-box had been broken and the explorer started hurling out the contents in reckless enthusiasm. Pink and white birch trees on a carpet of scarlet, fringing a blue lake, silver, twisted cedars reflected in still pools, wind swept, purple-blue clouds scudding over dark hills, and masses of varied coloured rocks overgrown with lichen.

The tempo was set and they started to tread the measure. But 1914 and the War came and the combination was snapped. Jackson returns to Montreal and enlists as a private in the 60th Battalion.

Discouraged with a sense of utter uselessness, Thomson turned again to the North.



In his canvas, "The Jack Pine", possibly the best known of his great panels, I think we can see Thomson himself symbolized in the sadness of the great tree which stands so quietly on the shore of the Bay, its branches drooping in great rhythmic sweeps against the evening sky, and the rocky hills across the water echoing the movement.

This is followed by "The Northern River". Here through a mass of dark stemmed fir trees, which present a series of vertical shafts, a long slow curve of a river winds; to break the monotony of the repeated verticals, one tree leaning far out over the water gives an arresting diagonal direction. The pale notes of the evening sky are reflected in the stream against which the twisted branches of the fir trees form a tapestry of light and dark. The forest stands hushed like a Prelude waiting for the full force of the symphony and it came with every chord vibrant. "Northern River" was purchased by the National Gallery after Thomson's death.

Two years later, the war still on, Thomson is back again in the North country. It was then that, on Canoe Lake, he painted in powerful strokes, against the wild tumult of the sky, a group of Pines caught and twisted together in the full force of the wind. Their roots fixed deeply in the iron rock, their boughs writhe and twist agonizingly in the gale---olive green black forms against sky and water, the whole shot through with blues and purples. This is "The West Wind" where the spirit of Thomson seems to burst its bonds---as Shelley prayed to the Wild West Wind that his might do---and flies with it across the waters to the further north---free at last.



Spring of 1917 saw Thomson up in Algonquin on his sixth and last sketching trip. Spring had a fascination for him too, with its strange stirrings and pulsations. He planned to paint a record of the unfolding year, with a sketch a day to set down each subtle gradation of mood and colour, from the days when the North first awoke from Winter's grip to the full leafed midsummer. April, May and June he worked in good weather and bad, setting up one rich wet board after another in his little tent, - and that same July his empty canoe was found drifting on the shores of the Bay.

The modern movement for spiritual freedom in Canada began with Thomson. Those who come after us will look back on our times and marvel at our lack of understanding of the two purely human functions with which man is equipped to advance his own evolution, - the capacity to think and the capacity to feel, but they will also see us following the trail blazed for us by those pioneer minds of the race, who travelled ahead in splendid solitude.

"Some day they will know what I mean," said Thomson.

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